



Norwegian  
Business School

This file was downloaded from BI Open Archive, the institutional repository (open access) at BI Norwegian Business School <https://biopen.bi.no>.

It contains the accepted and peer reviewed manuscript to the article cited below. It may contain minor differences from the journal's pdf version.

Nick Sitter, 'Defending the State: Nationalism, Geopolitics and Differentiated Integration in Visegrád Four Security Policy', (2021), 26, European Foreign Affairs

Review, Issue 3, pp. 127-144,

<https://kluwerlawonline.com/journalarticle/European+Foreign+Affairs+Review/26.3/E>

[ERR2021030](#)

Walter kluwers, the publisher, allows the author to deposit the version of the article that has been accepted for publication, in an institutional repository after 6 months.

## **Defending the State: Nationalism, Geopolitics and Differentiated Integration in Visegrád Four Security Policy**

**Accepted for publication in European Foreign Affairs Review, vol 26, 2021, last author version**

Nick Sitter

Professor of Political Economy, Department of Law and Governance, BI Norwegian Business School  
Professor of Public Policy, School of Public Policy, Central European University

### **Abstract**

During the second half of the 2010s the governments of Poland and Hungary took a sharp turn away from liberal democracy and the rule of law. As they slipped down the international democracy rankings, the European Union initiated its procedures under Article 7 to investigate possible breaches of its fundamental laws and values. However, the two governments sought to distinguish between their conflict with the European Commission over the rule of law on one hand and their commitment to collective security on the other. The central question in this article is whether they managed to do this, and to what extent democratic backsliding poses security challenges for the EU by weakening its actorness in the field of security, defence and foreign policy. A comparative assessment of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic suggests that democratic backsliding does indeed have security implications for the EU, but that this is only one of several factors driving differentiated integration in the Visegrád Four in this field. Developments in the region are part of a wider EU trend of re-nationalisation of security policy. Indeed, in the security field, vertical differentiated integration (in the sense of different mixes of supranational and intergovernmental regimes) is a key factor in mitigating the consequences of horizontal differentiation (different member state policies).

When Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary formed the Visegrád Group on 15 February 1991, the three new democracies shared broad and all-important common goals related to the transition from communism to liberal democracy and the rule of law, from command economies to markets, and from cold war confrontation to collective security anchored in NATO and the European Union. The paths of the four states have since diverged. They all joined the EU in 2004, but by 2020 the Polish (Law and Justice, PiS) and Hungarian (Fidesz) governments had reversed their commitments to liberal democracy and the rule of law. When they joined the EU, all four were deemed to have completed the transition to market economies and established the necessary administrative capacity to implement EU law, as per the criteria laid down at the Copenhagen summit of June 1993. Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999, and Slovakia followed five years later. At the time, as in most EU and NATO states, much of the security focus was on international terrorism. But the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted a reassessment of security threats across Europe. Against this backdrop of a Europe-wide trend of re-nationalisation of security policy, the key question for the present article is whether democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary has implications for the EU in terms of differentiated integration in foreign, security and defence policy, and for EU actorness.

The different tracks that the Visegrád Four (hereafter V4) have taken – politically, economically and in terms of security – are part of a broader pattern of differentiated integration. The term was coined in the early 1990s in debates about whether all EU member states should move forward at the same speed in all areas, particularly with a view to security cooperation in the context of enlargement to the neutral Austria, Sweden and Finland and the planned eastern enlargement. Alexander Stubb outlined the three most prominent alternatives: multi-speed, variable geometry, and à la carte integration.<sup>1</sup> Over the next decade scholars of Europeanization documented considerable variation across the EU in terms of policy implementation,<sup>2</sup> often explained in terms member state politics.<sup>3</sup> Many new EU-level arrangements featured built-in ambiguities and compromises that were designed to allow considerable room for variation at the state level.<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the millennium it was clear that differential integration across member states, in terms of both formal arrangements and actual policy implementation, was driven by both pull factors at the EU-level and push factors related to member states domestic politics.<sup>5</sup> Dirk Leuffen, Berthold Rittberger and Frank Schimmelfennig added the distinction between vertical and horizontal differentiated integration, where the former denotes integration reaching different levels across policies or sectors, and the latter involves different states implementing policies unevenly.<sup>6</sup> In line with Pernille Rieker's introduction to this special issue, integration is understood as a process, and everything that is not full integration or disintegration is some form of differentiated integration.

This article is divided into four main parts. The first part reviews the debates about the dynamics of differentiated integration and explores how this plays out in the context of foreign, security and defence policy in Central Europe. The second part turns to vertical differentiated integration in foreign, security and defence policy in Central Europe, and explores the causes of differentiated integration in the region. Here, in line with the other articles in this special issue, the focus is mainly on the states' policy preferences for closer or looser integration in certain policy areas, both formally and informally. The third section analyses horizontal differentiated integration, and discusses important examples of formal and informal differences in policy and policy implementation across the four states. The fourth section addresses the question about the relationship between differentiated integration and the EU's actorness in foreign, security and defence policy.

## 1. Introduction - Differentiated Integration in Central Europe

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander C.–G. Stubb, *A Categorization of Differentiated Integration*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34:2 (1996):283–295.

<sup>2</sup> Alkuin Kölliker, *Bringing Together or Driving Apart the Union? Toward a Theory of Differentiated Integration*, *West European Politics*, 24:4 (2001): 125–151; Johan P. Olsen, *The Many Faces of Europeanization*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:5 (2002): 921–952.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Bulmer, *Domestic politics and European Community Policy-making*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 21:4 (1983) 349–63; Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Cornell University Press, 1998); Paul Taggart, *A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary West European Party Systems*, *European Journal of Political Research*, 33 (1998) 363–388.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Taylor, *The Limits of European Integration* (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Svein S. Andersen & Nick Sitter, *Differentiated Integration: What Is It and How Much Can the EU Accommodate?*, *Journal of European Integration*, 28:4 (2006), 313–330.

<sup>6</sup> Johan P. Olsen, *The Many Faces of Europeanization*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:5 (2002): 921–952.

Differentiated integration has been debated since the first days of the establishment of the European institutions in the 1950s. Much of the early literature dealt with the diversity of the integration process and policy regimes that fell between international and federal arrangements, albeit without using the term differentiated integration.<sup>7</sup> Most European integration theories assumed low political pressure at the national level, or a 'permissive consensus'<sup>8</sup> and a tight coupling between decisions at the EU level and policy implementation at the national level. EU competition policy is the best, earliest example. However, in many cases EU rules allow considerable discretion and/or member state governments hold policy preferences that conflict somewhat with EU policy. This gives three alternatives to ordinary homogeneous integration. Table 1 combines this with the distinction between vertical and horizontal integration discussed above and Rieker's analysis of differentiated integration in this special issue in terms of a) economic and political interdependencies, b) consistency in terms of common rules, values and objectives, and c) structural connectedness by way of contacts and meetings, common resources, common institutions, and transfer of competencies.

Table 1. Patterns of differentiated integration

	EU policy implies homogeneity	EU policy accommodates diversity
No domestic politics conflict with EU policy (strong interdependence)	Strong consistency and connectedness => no DI e.g. competition policy	Moderate consistency (rules), stronger on values and connectedness => vertical DI e.g. PESCO as integration
Domestic politics conflict with EU policy (weak interdependence)	Some inconsistency => problematic horizontal DI e.g. V4 and refugee crisis	Weak consistency and connectedness => accommodate horizontal DI e.g. state defence postures

First, the upper right quadrant denotes a context in which EU policy is designed to accommodate diversity, in some cases by way of permitting a subset of member states to pursue further integration. In Rieker's terms, this means that while economic and political interconnectedness is high and there are clear common values and objectives, there is more differentiation by way of looser common rules. Structural connectedness is likely to be relatively high (among the relevant subset of member states). In this case differentiated integration can be the result of creative ambiguity, or even formal arrangements for enhanced cooperation among some states. Different sectors, or different areas within one sector, reach different levels (vertical DI), as illustrated in the discussion of the PESCO in Rieker's introduction to this special issue. There have been a number of initiatives in the defence and security sector to deal with this, including the West European Union, the Letter of Intent initiative on arms procurement, and EU – NATO cooperation. The second section of this paper returns to this theme.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen George, *Politics and Policy in the European Community* (Clarendon Press, 1985); ohn Pinder, 'Positive and Negative Integration: Some Problems of Economic Union in the EEC', *World Today*, 24 (1968), 88-110; William Wallace, *Less than a Federation, More than a Regime*, in Helen Wallace, William Wallace, & Carol Webb (eds), *Policy Making in the European Community*, (John Wiley, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Leon N. Lindberg & Stuart A. Scheingold, *Europe's Would-Be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community* (Prentice Hall, 1970).

Second, the lower right quadrant denotes similar conditions at the EU level, but in a context where economic and political interconnectedness is lower and structural connectedness is lower both in terms of interaction and institutions. States autonomously pursue policies that differ from those of the EU, in a context that allows policy variation. The wide range of national defence strategies and postures provide good examples, as do actual PESCO programs, the European Intervention Initiative, and the V4 Battle Group. The third section of this paper returns to this theme.

Third, the lower left quadrant includes cases where member state governments pursue policies that are at variant with EU policy. For the member states in question economic connectedness might still be high, but political interconnectedness is lower. The result is lack of consistency, both in terms of agreement with the relevant common EU values and objectives and in terms of the perceived legitimacy and acceptance of EU rules. These states may remain structurally connected in terms of participation in meetings and access to shared resources and common institutions, but they challenge the implications of formal EU competencies. The most important example is the EU's investigation of Poland and Hungary's under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union with a view to the possible suspension of important aspects of their EU membership on the grounds of violations of the rule of law. A particularly relevant policy example can be found in all V4 states' refusal to accept and relocate refugees in accordance with the EU plan of 2015. In April 2020 the European court of Justice ruled that Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic (Slovakia was not included because the number of refugees involved was too low) had violated EU law and that this could not be justified with reference to maintenance of law and order and the safeguarding of internal security.<sup>9</sup> However, because of the high degree of vertically differentiation, this form of horizontal differentiation is less important in the policy sectors discussed in the present paper.

The central question in the present paper is how all this works out in areas of what Stanley Hoffmann called 'high politics' in Central Europe.<sup>10</sup> This is shaped by two broad sets of issues: geopolitics and nationalism. Geopolitics came to play a more prominent role in the second decade of the new millennium than it did in the first two decades after the fall of communism. After 1989, the common factor for the V4 was their exposure to Russia. This led to a clear and explicit pro-US orientation, which was maintained through the transition from the first Bush administration through the Clinton administration and to the Bush jr. years. In the first decade after 9/11, this included clear support for the US-led Global War on Terror. However, the Russo-Ukrainian crisis of 2014 prompted a return to a much stronger focus on territorial defence. Although this happened across the EU, this effect was most pronounced in the Central European states. Moreover, Poland and Hungary went in very different directions, respectively fearful and hopeful about Russia's influence in the EU.

Second, the combination of nationalism and democratic backsliding has played an increasingly important role in shaping foreign and security policy in the V4, particularly in Warsaw and Budapest. The Hungarian case is the most severe, with dismantling of the rule of law, control of media and civil society, and grand corruption following Fidesz's victory in the 2010 election. In Poland, PiS embarked on a similar course after winning the 2015 election, but it lacked the constitution-altering super-majority that Fidesz enjoyed in Hungary. Although Slovakia and the Czech Republic have seen some controversy linked to the populist policies of Robert Fico and Andrej Babiš, this is a long way from the

---

<sup>9</sup> Court of Justice of the European Union, *Judgment in Joined Cases C-715/17, C-718/17 and C-719/17*, Press release 40/20.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hoffmann, *Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State in the Case of Western Europe*, Daedalus, 95 (1966): 862–915.

severe democratic backsliding of Hungary and Poland.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the policy implications have been somewhat similar, inasmuch as all four states have seen considerable political discourse that invokes the importance of maintaining national room for manoeuvre in the face of EU policy.

In short, given that differentiated integration is an integral part of the dynamics of European integration, a large degree of vertical and horizontal differentiated integration was all but inevitable after the EU's eastern enlargement. Among the V4, the combination of economic crises, the refugee crisis, and the re-emergence of geopolitics after the 2014 Crimean crisis prompted more focus on sovereignty and autonomy. The next two sections turn to how this has played out in terms of vertical and horizontal integration in Central Europe on security-related matters.

## 2. Vertical differentiated integration in foreign, security and defence policy in Central Europe

Vertical differentiated integration can be defined as the state that exists when policy areas “have been integrated at different speeds and reached different levels of centralization over time”<sup>12</sup> or, by Pernille Rieker in the introduction to this special issue, as different degrees of transfer of power from the national to the European level of governance. If the EU is taken as a whole, this has been a central feature of the organisation since its early days. Some core areas have always been more supranational than others. But even if vertical differentiation is applied to a subset of EU policies, there are variations in the mix between supranational and intergovernmental governance. As Rieker's article shows, this is very much the case in foreign, security and defence policy. Olivier de France and Nick Witney characterised the EU as ‘strategic cacophony’.<sup>13</sup>

Here vertical differentiated integration is investigated through analysis of the preferences and aims of the four states for policy decisions, national security strategies, ideas, and norms on common foreign, security and defence policy. In terms of Rieker's classification, Poland and Hungary may have aspired to a *leadership* role, but have been in no position to live up to this. Unwilling to settle down as *followers*, they have instead taken on the role of *laggards* or *disruptors*. By contrast, successive Czech and Slovak governments (with the partial exception of the Putin-friendly Czech president Miloš Zeman) have been more comfortable with the *followers* role. Consequently, in terms of the demand for vertical differentiation, the Polish and Hungarian governments have been more active than the other two V4 states.

As a group, the V4 have broadly welcomed vertical differentiated integration both in the broad and the narrow sense. During their first decade as EU member states, the governments in the four states supported the EU status quo, with a different mix of supranational and intergovernmental policy regimes both *across* the EU's then three pillars (the European Community, Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Police and Justice Cooperation) and *within* foreign, security and defence policy. Their continued support for a vertically differentiated EU, both in the broad and narrow sense, is

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Bakke & Nick Sitter, *The EU's Enfants Terribles: Democratic backsliding in Central Europe since 2010*, Perspectives on Politics, published online (first view) 24 July 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, Dirk Leuffen and Berthold Rittberger, *The European Union as a system of differentiated integration: interdependence, politicization and differentiation*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22:6 (2015): 764-782, 756.

<sup>13</sup> Olivier de France & Nick Witney, *Europe's Strategic Cacophony*, European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, 2012; Olivier de France & Nick Witney, *Étude comparative des livres blancs des 27 États membres de l'UE : pour la définition d'un cadre européen*, Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire, 2012.

consistent with their different stances on key geopolitical issues. Poland's more NATO-oriented and Russo-phobic grand strategy has resulted in some scepticism toward EU security initiatives, including an initial reluctance to participate in PESCO for fear that it would weaken NATO.<sup>14</sup> This is in contrast to the more EU-oriented approaches found in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and Hungary's pro-Moscow orientation under Viktor Orbán.<sup>15</sup> PESCO is perhaps the best example of the ability of states with very different grand strategies when it comes to geopolitics to agree on what Jolyon Howorth labelled 'positive differentiation' – flexible formulae that pragmatically accommodate a range of diverse national interests to facilitate integration.<sup>16</sup> As a case in point, by the third wave of PESCO project, Poland had joined the other three as mid-range participants (see table 3 below).<sup>17</sup>

The 2014 Ukraine crisis marked a turning point for three of the four states' defence and security policy, inasmuch as it accelerated the shift away from a focus on participation in international operations toward territorial defence. V4 restructuring of defence in the 1990s and early 2000s fit NATO and EU policy preferences, with a focus on contribution to international rapid reaction efforts, and national security documents focussing on terrorism and crisis management. But the 2014 crisis prompted demands for deeper EU integration in the Czech and Slovak cases, a more assertive common policy across the board in the Polish case, and combination of more national autonomy *and* stronger EU defence policy in Hungary.<sup>18</sup> Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic all updated their national strategy documents to reflect their shift in focus from international threats from non-state actors to Russia as the main source of national security concerns.

- In Poland the new Strategic Defence Review in 2016 was followed by a National Defence Concept the year after, both of which unambiguously pointed to Russia as the main threat, and suggested a reduced commitment to international operations.<sup>19</sup>
- In 2015, Czech security strategy documents indicated a similar, if somewhat milder, shift, with focus on what was described as a deteriorating European security situation, concern about states that do not respect international law, need to decrease economic dependence on potentially hostile states.<sup>20</sup>
- Slovakia's strategic review process was hampered by domestic political divisions until 2020. New defence and military strategy documents were drafted in 2017, based on a 2016 White Paper that identified Russia as main threat.<sup>21</sup> But as long as it was part of the governing coalition, the Slovak National Party (SNS) blocked the adoption of the new documents on the grounds of their focus on the Russian threat.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, leading politicians such as Robert Fico

<sup>14</sup> Alice Billon-Galland & Martin Quencez, *Can France and Germany Make PESCO Work as a Process Toward EU Defense?*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Brief, 2017/133, 4; Michta, *Poland*, in Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss (eds) *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*, (Oxford University Press, 2018), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Michal Onderco, *Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia*, in Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss supra n.14, 284.

<sup>16</sup> Jolyon Howorth, *Differentiation in security and defence policy*, *Comparative European Politics*, 17 (2019): 261-277.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Blockmans & Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, *Differentiated integration within PESCO – clusters and convergence in EU defence*, *CEPS Research Report*, No. 2019/04.

<sup>18</sup> Michta supra n.14, Onderco supra n.15.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of National Defence [Poland], *The Strategic Defence Review*, 2016: Ministry of National Defence [Poland], *The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Bezpečnostní strategie České republiky*, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, *White Paper on Defence of the Slovak Republic*, 2016; Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, *Bezpečnostná stratégia Slovenskej republiky*, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Euractiv, *Security and defence strategies to be approved by Slovak government*, EURACTIV.sk 11 December 2020.

(Smer – Social Democrats, prime minister 2012-2018) also criticized the EU’s sanctions against Russia on occasion.

- In contrast, the Hungarian government stuck to its 2012 National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy, with its combined focus on territorial defence and international operations.<sup>23</sup> This combination of territorial defence, national autonomy, and a positive attitude to both EU defence and Putin’s Russia was a recurring theme in speeches by the prime minister and defence minister and the Hungarian Ministry of Defence’s upgraded document on strategy.<sup>24</sup>

Table 2 – Vertical differentiated integration and grand strategy in the V4

	Grand strategy	Defence strategy	Geopolitics vis-à-vis Russia
Poland	Euro-sceptic, rule of law conflict	Territorial defence, NATO first	NATO to deterrence an aggressor
Hungary	Euro-sceptic, rule of law conflict	Territorial defence, national focus	Partnership
Slovakia	Pro-EU, marginal party Euroscepticism	Territorial defence, EU focus	Increased concern, politically divided
Czech Rep	Pro-EU, some party Euroscepticism	Territorial defence, EU focus	Increased concern

### 3. Horizontal differentiated integration in foreign, security and defence policy in Central Europe

Horizontal differentiated integration is defined in the articles in this special issue as the state that exists when policy areas “integrated policies are neither uniformly nor exclusively valid in the EU’s member states”.<sup>25</sup> Although the causes of the demand for horizontal differentiated integration in Central and Eastern Europe are in many ways comparable to those for vertical differentiated integration, one additional independent variable is important with respect to horizontal DI. The EU has a long history of policy compromises that permit all parties to declare victory back in their national capitals. A key ingredient here is ambiguity, in the shape of compromises that can be (and are) interpreted differently in Brussels and in certain member state capitals.

In addition to differences in domestic policy, the analyses of horizontal differentiation in the present collection of articles includes different levels of participation in common initiatives, and ‘mini-lateral’ cooperation. The V4 regional equivalent of the European Intervention Initiative is the Visegrád Group (the V4 were not invited to join EI2), but this was established after the collapse of communism with a view to cooperation on EU and NATO accession and has a much wider remit than EI2. The first big defence step was the V4 Battlegroup, for deployment in EU and NATO operations, announced in 2011.<sup>26</sup> The 2014 Ukraine crisis prompted further ambitions for deeper coordination of armed forces, foreign policy and defence procurement, but in practice cooperation in these fields developed more slowly, with the exception of coordination of policy on the refugee crisis, including efforts to frame

<sup>23</sup> Hungarian Government, *Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiája*, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Hungarian Ministry of Defence, *A haza védelmében*, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, Dirk Leuffen and Berthold Rittberger, *supra* n.12, 765.

<sup>26</sup> Michal Paulech & Jana Urbanovská, *Visegrad four EU Battlegroup: Meaning and Progress, Obrana a strategie* 14:2 (2014): 49-60.



this as a joint security issue in 2016.<sup>27</sup> In what follows, three key issues are used to explore the dynamics of horizontal differentiated integration in the region: force postures and priorities, PESCO participation, and security and trade policies toward Russia with respect to pipeline politics.

The first broad security question that involves horizontal differentiated integration is common to all EU states, not just the V4. The evidence reported by a team of EU researchers led by Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss suggests that there is nothing special about East Central Europe here.<sup>28</sup> Across the EU, the joint quest for EU 'strategic autonomy' gave way to a renationalisation of defence policy and armed forces postures in the second half of the 2010s. Meijer and Wyss therefore argue that 'cacophony' is a more apt term for EU defence policy. Defence procurement illustrates the point.

- The International Institute of Strategic Studies' *Military Balance 2020* pointed to increased reliance on the USA as the central theme in Polish defence and security strategy after 2014 (including agreement on military bases), which combined increased defence spending and reduction in troops available for international operations from 3,500 to 1,300 over the decade up to 2020.<sup>29</sup> Poland was the first former Warsaw Pact state to order US fighter aircraft, and long combined a 48-strong fleet of F-16 with 30 ageing Mig-29s. In 2019 it moved to replace the latter with F-35s.<sup>30</sup>
- Prague and Bratislava both have more EU-oriented (or perhaps, EU – NATO balanced) security policy, but went in opposite directions when it came to fighter aircraft: In December 2018 Slovakia signed a deal for 14 F-16 fighter jets from the USA to replace its 11 Russian Mig-29s; whereas in 2004 the Czech Republic opted to lease 14 Swedish Gripen fighter aircraft (renewed for twelve years in 2014).
- Hungary developed a more independent defence posture in the second half of the 2010s, but combined this with maintaining its commitment to NATO operations and increased the number of troops available for international operations from 1000 to 1200 as of 2019.<sup>31</sup> Like the Czech Republic it opted for the Swedish Gripen fighter aircraft (12 fighters in 2001, subsequently increased to 14).

Second, however, in terms of their participation in PESCO the V4 have moved towards a common trajectory despite their other defence and security differences. Slovakia stands out at the lower end with participation in only six projects, of which the only one related to military hardware is the prototype European Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle/Amphibious Assault Vehicle/Light Armoured Vehicle and the EuroArtillery mobile precision artillery platform. However, all four participate in no more than three projects when it comes to land, air or maritime defence systems (table 3). On an EU-wide comparison the states fall somewhere between the high-participating West European states and the other formerly communist states (and Ireland), which have an even lower participation rate.<sup>32</sup>

Table 3. PESCO Participation by 2020

<sup>27</sup> Zdeněk Kříž, Stanislava Brajerčíková & Jana Urbanovská, *Defense Co-Operation Between Germany and the Visegrad Countries, The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31:3 (2018): 354-371.

<sup>28</sup> Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss, *supra* n.14.

<sup>29</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance*, London: International Institute of International Affairs, 2020, 78.

<sup>30</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance*, London: International Institute of International Affairs, 2014; Euractiv, Slovakia signs deal to replace Russian-made fighter jets with US F-16 planes, EURACTIV.com with Reuters, 3 December 2018; Euractiv, *Amid beefed up security cooperation, Poland inks contract for US-made F-35 fighter jets*, EURACTIV.com, 3 February 2020.

<sup>31</sup> IISS *supra* n.29, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Steven Blockmans & Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, *supra* n.17, 7.

Total PESCO projects	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Hungary	Poland
Training 10	1	1	2*	2*
Maritime 6				2
Land 6	1	2	2	1
Air 4	2			
Cyber 8	1		2	2
Space 2				1
Enabling 11	3**	3**	5**	4**
<b>Total 47</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>

12 projects feature only one V4 state, 16 include two or three V4 states, and two all four states.

\* Includes the Hungary and Poland-only Special Operations Forces Training Centre

\*\* Includes two projects with all V4 states (European Medical Command; Military Mobility)

The third big security question that has sent the V4 on different paths is the question of how to handle an increasingly assertive Russia, particularly with regard to dependence on Russian gas. For successive Polish government this has been the single most important security issue, both in terms of military security and energy security; whereas for the Hungarian Fidesz government Putin's Russia is more like a role model; and the Czech and Slovak governments fall somewhere between the other two.<sup>33</sup> The litmus test is support for efforts to block the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, where Prague has a record of supporting the German position regarding the need to limit the EU's exercise of regulatory power to correcting market failures while Warsaw has long lobbied for the EU to wield its regulatory power more aggressively for security purposes.<sup>34</sup> In 2015, Poland took the lead in demanding a strong focus on energy security, for example pushing for an EU monopsony (import monopoly) of gas vis-à-vis Russia to counter Gazprom's export monopoly. Polish regulators have since adopted a somewhat wider reading of their remit than for example German regulators, and imposed fines on Gazprom over the Nord Stream 2 project.

Table 3 – Horizontal differentiated integration and grand strategy in the V4

	National defence posture	PESCO participation	Nord Stream 2
Poland	US-oriented F-16 and F-35 fighters	11/47	Hard-line, deploy regulatory power
Hungary	NATO-oriented Gripen fighters	12/47	Low profile, pro-Russian
Slovakia	EU-oriented F-16 fighters	6/47	Low-profile, mixed, politically divided
Czech Rep	Germany-oriented Gripen fighters	8/47	High profile, market oriented

<sup>33</sup> Andrej Nosko & Matúš Mišík, *No United Front: The Political Economy of Energy in Central and Eastern Europe*, in Andersen, Svein S., Andreas Goldthau and Nick Sitter (eds), *Energy Union: Europe's New Liberal Mercantilism?* (Palgrave, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Andreas Goldthau & Nick Sitter, *Power, authority and security: the EU's Russian gas dilemma*, *Journal of European Integration*, 42:1 (2020): 111-127.

#### 4. The Visegrád Four, Differentiated Integration and EU Actorness

Small European states face a potential dilemma if they rely on collective security arrangements: the choice between policy stances driven by domestic politics and the requirements and expectations that come with membership of NATO and the EU. One way out of this is to try to align national and EU/NATO policy preferences. This has long been the strategy of the Low Countries. The Scandinavians have done something similar, but with a few explicit trade-offs. Denmark achieved its EU opt-outs with the Maastricht Treaty; Norway opted for quasi-membership of the EU through the European Economic Area arrangement; non-NATO members Sweden and Finland work closely with NATO (and Sweden assumed a Danish-style opt-out from EMU). In the run-up to their joining NATO and the EU, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic opted for a similar strategy of aligning domestic and European politics, and Slovakia did something similar after Vladimír Mečiar lost office in 1998. But in the 2010s, Budapest and Warsaw opted for a different, more confrontational strategy. Both openly broke with core EU policies, laws, and values, but sought to maintain both the collective security and the fiscal transfers associated with EU membership. As of 2020, they had achieved this. But this strategy raises three important questions about the implications for EU actorness in foreign, defence and security policy.

The first question is whether democratic backsliding directly undermines the EU's capacity for actorness. Comparative analysis of the defence, security and foreign policies of the V4 suggests that Warsaw and Budapest's strategy to de-couple security policy from the rule of law is working. Much of the explanation for this lies in what Daniel Kelemen calls the EU's 'authoritarian equilibrium': at the 'federal' level leaders need political support from the authoritarian member states for EU-level decisions, but at the same time they lack the tools to prevent state-level democratic backsliding.<sup>35</sup> The flip-side is the backsliding states' small-states-and-collective-security logic, which explains why the Polish and Hungarian governments work hard to present themselves as good citizens in security issues even as they openly break EU rules in other fields. The Czech and Slovak governments have so far avoided this problem, but both have remained committed to a degree of V4 solidarity. This suggests that Vertical Differentiated Integration (across broad EU policy areas) is here to stay. As long as geopolitics trumps other foreign policy priorities in Warsaw and Budapest, this need not directly undermine the EU's actorness in foreign, security and defence policy.

Second, however, a somewhat different answer is warranted in case of disputes where national foreign policy interests clash with EU policy. The differences within the V4 with respect to Russia is the clearest example of this. Although the Hungarian government continued to support the EU sanctions against Russia, Orbán repeatedly signalled his disapproval. The mixture of supranationalism and internationalism permits a variety of national strategies, and the V4 have taken advantage of this. The EU's actorness in foreign, security and defence policy is therefore likely to continue to be constrained by the intergovernmental mechanisms that are a key feature of vertical differentiated integration.

Third, although there are no formal opt-outs of the kind that Denmark secured at the time of the Maastricht treaty, there are a few important cases of informal horizontal differentiation. At the regional level, the V4 joined most other post-communist states in pursuing a closer relationship with

---

<sup>35</sup> R. Daniel Kelemen, *The European Union's authoritarian equilibrium*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27:3 (2020): 481-499.

China than the EU as a whole. At the V4 level, the four states have taken defence and security policy in a different direction from mainstream EU, particularly with the effort to link terrorism and immigration as a security challenge. In addition both Poland and Hungary have broken with the EU's overall (albeit very ambiguous) policy towards Russia, although in this case the two states have pulled in opposite directions. While these kinds of policies might represent security problems of their own (whether related to Chinese geo-economics or Russian efforts to exercise covert influence in the EU), they do not significantly reduce the EU's external actorness.

The EU's actorness in foreign, security and defence policy can be summed up as its ability to speak with one voice and act consistently, without being openly undermined by its member states. As an actor on the international stage, the EU can avail itself of hard power, soft power, and regulatory power.<sup>36</sup> With respect to Central Europe, differentiated integration has affected each in a different way. The EU's hard-power ability to use military or economic coercion has always been limited by requirements for unanimous decision-making. While this has made it more difficult to agree initiatives, it has also ensured that once agreed they enjoy a degree of legitimacy. Moreover, this ability is enhanced by vertical differentiated integration, most notably in the form of PESCO. On the other hand, the EU's ability to wield its regulatory (economic) power depends largely on the Commission's tools and strategy, and this remains unaffected by vertical differentiation (whether across the EU policies or within security-related policies) and is embarrassed rather than hampered by informal horizontal differentiation. The effect of differentiated integration on EU soft power might be more significant if accommodation of democratic backsliding undermines the EU's credibility. However, leading by example has always worked best where it is least needed. It has had little or no effect on for example Russia or China. There is therefore little to suggest that either member state de-democratization or differentiated integration in Central Europe directly and significantly reduces EU actorness in foreign, security and defence policy.

### **Conclusion: Mostly harmless?**

The Visegrád Four have been the beneficiaries rather than the drivers of differentiated integration in the fields of foreign, security and defence policy. Despite Fidesz and PiS's aspirations to lead a new Christian national populist right group in the EU, the V4 states cannot compete with the leadership that the likes of Germany and France provide. A key achievement for Budapest and Warsaw has been the continued vertical differentiation across the EU's different policy areas, and consequently decoupling between their rule-of-law violations and collective security. The present level of vertical differentiation within the foreign policy, security and defence sectors suits all four states; like most EU and NATO members their defence doctrine turned more national and territorial in the second decade of the new millennium. In these policy areas, the level of horizontal differentiation lies in the middle to high range compared to other member states. Democratic backsliding and the consequent differential integration with respect to the rule of law might entail an existential threat to the EU because it undermines the very foundation of the single market, but as of 2020 it had done relatively little to damage EU security actorness. Indeed, as far as Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic are concerned, vertical differentiated integration is a key factor in mitigating the consequences of horizontal differentiation.

---

<sup>36</sup> Andreas Goldthau & Nick Sitter, *Power, authority and security: the EU's Russian gas dilemma*, *Journal of European Integration*, 42:1 (2020): 111-127.

## References

Svein S. Andersen & Nick Sitter, *Differentiated Integration: What Is It and How Much Can the EU Accommodate?*, *Journal of European Integration*, 28:4 (2006), 313-330.

Elisabeth Bakke & Nick Sitter, *The EU's Enfants Terribles: Democratic backsliding in Central Europe since 2010*, *Perspectives on Politics*, published online (first view) 24 July 2020.

Steven Blockmans & Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, *Differentiated integration within PESCO – clusters and convergence in EU defence*, *CEPS Research Report*, No. 2019/04.

Alice Billon-Galland & Martin Quencez, *Can France and Germany Make PESCO Work as a Process Toward EU Defence?*, *The German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Brief*, 2017/133.

Simon Bulmer, *Domestic politics and European Community Policy-making*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 21:4 (1983) 349-63.

Court of Justice of the European Union, *Judgment in Joined Cases C-715/17, C-718/17 and C-719/17*, Press release 40/20.

Olivier de France & Nick Witney, *Europe's Strategic Cacophony*, *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, 2012.

Olivier de France & Nick Witney, *Étude comparative des livres blancs des 27 États membres de l'UE : pour la définition d'un cadre européen*, *Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire*, 2012.

Euractiv, *Slovakia signs deal to replace Russian-made fighter jets with US F-16 planes*, *EURACTIV.com* with Reuters, 3 December 2018.

Euractiv, *Amid beefed up security cooperation, Poland inks contract for US-made F-35 fighter jets*, *EURACTIV.com*, 3 February 2020

Euractiv, *Security and defence strategies to be approved by Slovak government*, *EURACTIV.sk* 11 December 2020

Stephen George, *Politics and Policy in the European Community* (Clarendon Press, 1985).

Andreas Goldthau & Nick Sitter, *Soft Power with a Hard Edge: EU Policy Tools and Energy Security*, *Review of International Political Economy*, 22:5 (2015): 941-965

Andreas Goldthau & Nick Sitter, *Power, authority and security: the EU's Russian gas dilemma*, *Journal of European Integration*, 42:1 (2020): 111-127.

Stanley Hoffmann, *Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State in the Case of Western Europe*, *Daedalus*, 95 (1966): 862-915.

Jolyon Howorth, *Differentiation in security and defence policy*, *Comparative European Politics*, 17 (2019): 261-277.

Hungarian Government, *Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiája*, 2012.

Hungarian Ministry of Defence, *A haza védelmében*, 2017.

IISS, *The Military Balance*, London: International Institute of International Affairs, 2014

IISS, *The Military Balance*, London: International Institute of International Affairs, 2020

R. Daniel Kelemen, *The European Union's authoritarian equilibrium*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27:3 (2020): 481-499

Alkuin Kölliker, *Bringing Together or Driving Apart the Union? Toward a Theory of Differentiated Integration*, *West European Politics*, 24:4 (2001): 125-151.

Dirk Leuffen, Berthold Rittberger & Frank Schimmelfennig, *Differentiated Integration: Explaining Variation in the European Union* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

Leon N. Lindberg & Stuart A. Scheingold, *Europe's Would-Be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community* (Prentice Hall, 1970).

Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss, *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Andrew A. Michta, *Poland*, in Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss (eds) *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Bezpečnostní strategie České republiky*, 2015.

Ministry of National Defence [Poland], *The Strategic Defence Review*, 2016

Ministry of National Defence [Poland], *The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, 2017.

Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, *White Paper on Defence of the Slovak Republic*, 2016

Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, *Bezpečnostná stratégia Slovenskej republiky*, 2017

Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

Andrej Nosko & Matúš Mišík, *No United Front: The Political Economy of Energy in Central and Eastern Europe*, in Andersen, Svein S., Andreas Goldthau and Nick Sitter (eds), *Energy Union: Europe's New Liberal Mercantilism?* (Palgrave, 2017).

Johan P. Olsen, *The Many Faces of Europeanization*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:5 (2002): 921–952.

Michal Onderco, *Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia*, in Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss (eds) *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

John Pinder, *Positive and Negative Integration: Some Problems of Economic Union in the EEC*, *World Today*, 24 (1968), 88-110.

Michal Paulech & Jana Urbanovská, *Visegrad four EU Battlegroup: Meaning and Progress*, *Obrana a strategie* 14:2 (2014): 49-60.

Frank Schimmelfennig, Dirk Leuffen and Berthold Rittberger, *The European Union as a system of differentiated integration: interdependence, politicization and differentiation*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22:6 (2015): 764-782

Alexander C.–G. Stubb, *A Categorization of Differentiated Integration*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34:2 (1996):283–295.

Paul Taggart, *A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary West European Party Systems*, *European Journal of Political Research*, 33 (1998) 363-388.

Paul Taylor, *The Limits of European Integration* (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

William Wallace, *Less than a Federation, More than a Regime*, in Helen Wallace, William Wallace, & Carol Webb (eds), *Policy Making in the European Community*, (John Wiley, 1983).

Zdeněk Kříž, Stanislava Brajerčíková & Jana Urbanovská, *Defense Co-Operation Between Germany and the Visegrad Countries*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31:3 (2018): 354-371.